

## **In The Memory of “Phenomenal Woman” Reading Resistance in the Selected Poems of Maya Angelou**

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*You may not control all the events That happen to you, but you can Decide not to be reduced by them.*

*--Maya Angel*

The decision of not getting reduced by the adversities of life has strengthened the spirit of humanism. It has not only enlightened the human minds by helping them to recognize their capabilities and human rights but has also provided the fortitude to claim their identities. Humanism is a prism with the various shades of mankind. The spirit of humanism has been appropriately summed up in the following quote of William James,

“Humanism is not a single hypothesis or theorem, and it dwells on no new facts. It is rather a slow shifting in the philosophic perspective, making things appear as from a new center of interest or point of sight.”

A literary work becomes an honest and authentic document when it highlights the truth of human experience. A writer has to rely on facts in order to make his work credible. However by voicing the plight of Black Americans Maya Angelou has performed this task with sincere accountability. Racial, political, social and cultural oppression is a persistent and importunate situation which had led the lives of African- Americans towards darkness, poverty and helplessness. The

marginalization of the entire community had robbed them off their cultural values and customs. But the resilience and the firmness to resist the oppression to get freedom and equality have changed the history of their present. The survival and success of Black Americans, after enduring the bitterest form of injustice and discrimination in the history of America, is indeed a remarkable accomplishment.

Human beings are not sent on the earth to oppress or to tolerate oppression but to create a better world. Naming of the injustice and oppression is a step in this direction that can change the entire social, political and economic scenario of our planet. Blacks in America were treated as slaves; they were given no human rights, their job was just to accept that their blackness means evil and evil has to be tamed and stopped to save human civilization from destruction. So the White society in America had not only dominated, oppressed and destroyed the Blacks but had also presented itself as the savior of mankind by associating their Whiteness with justice, goodness and power. According to Foucault power is everywhere. Resistance comes

when people become able to recognize power. But the problem arises when a group of people misuse their power under the façade of religion, welfare schemes and assimilation policies and pose a great threat to the identity of a particular community. As a consequence, the oppressed class unconsciously starts supporting their repression. They start believing in the hegemonic ideas which lay emphasis on their subjugation and oppression. To inculcate self-hatred in the minds of its subordinates is a powerful tool in the hands of dominant. As Paulo Frier says,

“Self –depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressor hold of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing know nothing and capable of learning anything.” (p-45)

But when people realize that their condition is not natural but an outcome of the dominant class’ desire to hold the powerful position, they begin to resist. They show their resistance through various ways like rebellion, public meetings, armed struggle or writing.

The Black Americans have used writing as a powerful medium to resist dominance, oppression and identity crisis. Here lies the contribution of Maya Angelou who has delineated the misery, oppression, suffering, humiliation and marginalization faced by Black women in her works and thereby has successfully imparted the elements of universality.

Maya Angelou was popularly hailed as the Renaissance woman of America. She was a poet, novelist, educator, producer, actress, dancer and civil rights activist. She has vividly endorsed her own plight as a Black woman in her autobiography written in six volumes. She was hardly three and half year old when her parents

Bailey and Vivian Baxter Johnson got divorced. She along with her brother, Bailey Jr., was sent to live with her paternal grand- mother. This personal displacement coupled with social dislodgement made her aware about her racial and social subordination and this paved the way for her quest for identity. Maya’s personal experiences and the roots of her African heritage are profoundly embedded in her poetry. The experiences of segregation, isolation, exploitation constitute the main themes her poetry.

Historically speaking, colonization has directly and deeply affected the lives of women. The women writers have always aspired for better treatment, freedom and equality. They have used writing as a major tool to depict their marginalized, scattered and rambling identity. It is pertinent to note that women suffered much more than their male counter parts. While writing a poem about a woman Maya has been fully aware of the memories of her excruciating past, gender discrimination and power relations. Maya herself was raped by her mother’s boyfriend

when she was just eight. The incident left a permanent scar on her memory. She couldn’t talk for four years. However during this period her habit of reading strengthened her feminist leanings and she expressed her disillusionment as well as resistance through her writings. According to Maya, Sexual violence either by stranger or by spouse was perhaps the highest social stigma faced by women. Her poems are a testimony to this fact. In her poem “**Men**” she has highlighted the patriarchal dominance in an ironic manner. She says,

“One day they hold you in the  
Palms of their hands, gentle, as if you  
Were the last raw egg in the world. Then

They tighten up... Your body has slammed shut.  
Forever.  
No keys exist."

In "**Million Man March**", she talks about the traditional roles assigned to women and the travails of women caused by male hegemony. It seems as if she is having a dig at men by voicing the universal oppression faced by women. Her candid confession is evident from the following lines,

"Courtesy into our bedroom  
Gentleness into our kitchen  
Care into our nursery"

The hall mark of Maya's poetry lies in the fact that her poetry is not only a celebration of the traditional role of women but is also an endeavor to subvert the conservative approach adopted by the society to keep women in subordinate position. She has never romanticized anything rather she has vehemently exposed the hypocrisy, double standards and the vested interests employed by the White dominant class against the Black community.

Religion plays a vital role in the lives of people and to resist it is not a cake walk. But so far as Black people were concerned, religion was used to suppress their individuality. It was religion sans religiosity. The Blacks were segregated and deliberately kept away from participating in holy ceremonies. The evil of apartheid was exposed by Maya in a very circumlocutory manner. Her poem "**Our Grandmothers**" vividly describes the plight of black women,

"Our Grandmothers who stood in mid ocean,  
seeking dry land.  
She searched God's face.  
Assured, she placed her fire of service  
On the altar, and though clothed in the finery of  
faith when

She appeared at the temple door no sign  
Welcomed Black Grandmother."

Maya Angelou has brought into lime light the 'colonized- mind syndrome', enslavement and the mal-treatment meted out to the Black women. She has empowered her own community by reposing faith in them and braving the challenges of life. That's why Maya's poems have become universal in their content and spirit.

In "**Savior**" she seeks the mercy of the Lord but she avoids giving Him a name. Her deep rooted discontent is very much evident in the following lines,

"Visit us again, Savior.  
Your children, burdened with disbelief,  
blinded by a patina of wisdom,  
Carom down this vale of fear.  
We cry for you although we have lost your  
name."

A psycho-analytical analysis of Maya's poetry reveals that it is the masculine chauvinism, sexist exploitation on one hand and the White's hatred towards Blacks on other hand is responsible for creating inferiority complex among Black women. The predicament of entire Black American community is reflected in the poem "**When I Think of Myself**":

"When I think about myself,  
I almost laugh myself to death,  
My life has been one great big joke"

However the meaningless existence of the Black women and the biased attitude of the Whites didn't suppress the spark of liberty, equality and fraternity in Maya. Despite every odd, she is very much aware of her helplessness and says "A dance that's walked [not danced], A song that's speaking [not sung]". But her message lies in moving on and celebrating the fragmentation of

human values. Her incorrigible optimism is very much obvious from **"On the Pulse of Morning"**,

"The Rock cries out to us today,  
You may stand upon me,  
But do not hide your face... History, despite its  
wrenching pain,  
Cannot be un-lived, but if faced  
With courage, need not be lived again... Lift up  
your eyes  
Upon this day breaking for you  
Give birth again  
To the dream."

In **"Coleridge Jackson"** Maya has tried to show how the behavior of the dominant class forces the Blacks to be violent as they have no other way to express their anguish, anger and agitation. The helpless men beat their women and kids and the powerful class gets a chance to label them as wild, uncivilized and stone hearted. She has beautifully drawn the image of a Black person whose White boss is unfair to him without any reason and calls him a "sorry nigger" but the man can't question the authority as he can't afford to lose his job. So he "kept his lips closed, sealed, jammed tight." Through this poem Maya clearly gives a big jolt to the oppressor as well as the oppressed.

**"One More Round"** is another poem where Maya again tries to raise the consciousness of her community. She makes them realize the oppression and asks them to resist it,

"Brothers and sisters know the daily grind,  
It was not labor made them lose their minds.  
They were born to work up to their graves  
But they were not born  
To be worked-out slaves."

The racial discrimination and the longing for freedom and equality forms the crux of the poem **"Caged Bird"**. The caged bird is symbolic of the

American Black who is put behind the bars and whose freedom is curtailed. It is not allowed to fly high in the sky. On the other hand the poem also shows the pitiable condition of the Black women who are doubly oppressed:

"But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams  
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream  
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing"

Though its wings are clipped and feet are tied yet it sings songs of freedom. Thus the quest to gain identity and freedom is prevalent in Maya's poetry. The act of singing herself creatively and embracing her body with full acceptance helped Maya to regain her erased self. She calls herself **"Phenomenal Woman"** and thereby liberates her women counter parts from the White standards of beauty. She rejects to feel bad about her skin color and outer appearance. This rejection of white beauty ideals and falling in love with one's own self is a point of consciousness which raised Maya above the mundane realities of the Blacks' existence and made her proud of herself and her heritage. She rejoiced her enigmatic and magnetic Black feminine identity by saying,

"Men themselves have wondered  
What they see in me.

They try so much  
But they can't touch  
My inner mystery  
Phenomenally, Phenomenal woman, That's me"

This self acceptance and celebration of womanhood can easily be related to her resistance against the White authority. It can be seen as an exodus or a point of arrival through which Maya tried to embrace the transformation which led her towards the liberation.

the poem **"Still I Rise"** presents the dominant class' perspective which considers the Black

Americans an inferior race. But Maya makes it clear that self assertion of her Black female self is more important to her. She says

"You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies....but like dust in  
the air I will rise"

She subverts the oppressor's tool and represents the image of the Black woman which is entirely opposite to the White standards. She in fact tries to visualize a new picture of Black woman:

"Does my sassiness upset you?  
Why are you beset with gloom?  
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells  
Pumping in my living room."

It can be safely said that Maya not only succeeded in portraying the exploitation and the discrimination but also in helping her people to find reasons to celebrate their existence. The following lines from "**Still I Rise**" speak volumes of her courage, determination, resistance and assertion of this phenomenally phenomenal woman:

"You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I'll rise.  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave."

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